



National Quality Standards Framework Information Notes for Services



An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthaí Óige
Department of
Children and Youth Affairs



National Quality Standards Framework



National Quality Standards Framework

The National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) is a support and development tool for the youth work sector. Its main purpose is to support youth work services to improve the work they do, and show that work to others...

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National Quality Standards Framework

Information Note

Stakeholder Document

What is the National Quality Standards Framework (NQS)?

The National Quality Standards Framework (NQS) is a support and development tool for the youth work sector. Its main purpose is to support youth work services¹ to improve the work they do, and show that work to others, including the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) who fund many youth services around the country.

The NQS is based on 5 core principles or essential qualities found in good youth work practice, and 10 standards. The standards represent the main elements a service needs to have in place in order to meet its legal requirements and deliver quality youth work services to young people and their communities.

Who are the stakeholders?

Stakeholders are the people who will effect and are affected by the activities of the service for example, they can include young people, volunteers, parents and community representatives.

Why have a NQS?

There are many different types of services around the country. They all have different approaches and different ways of describing the work that they do. The role of the NQS is to develop a common framework that allows for difference, but devises one way of recording and talking about the work. The NQS also aims to:

- Provide a support and development tool to services
- Establish standards in the practice and provision of youth work
- Help to improve the evidence- base for youth work
- Ensure resources are used effectively in the youth work sector

What will the NQS do?

It will lead to a better youth work service for young people and their communities.

What support is available to help a Youth Service implement the NQS?

Your service can access support and guidance from the Officer². The service in turn will allocate a staff member(s) to support young people, volunteers, parents and community representatives to participate in the NQS. Staff members can include Youth Workers, Project Leaders, Managers and Administrators.

What is involved in the NQS?

The NQS process takes three years. In year one it starts by looking at the service as it really is and writing that down. The first thing written down is a 'statement of youth work practice', which is usually about a page and a half long and explains what the service does, why and how it does it, who it is for, and where it works. When this is done the next step is to use the 5 core principles and the 10 standards as headings to record the current position of the service; this then becomes the 'snapshot' of the service.

On completion of the 'snapshot', the service will then develop a targeted plan (Continuous Improvement Plan) to improve the service over the next three years. Using this plan the service sets about improving bit by bit, until all of the targets are met.

Every year the service looks at itself and reports on how it has changed over the last year. It uses the year one 'snapshot' and its continuous improvement plan (CIP) as a bench mark to measure progress.

When the service has assessed itself it then brings in the Officer to provide external assessment and to confirm the internal process. The Officer will also support the service to set and meet its improvement targets for the next year.

What role can I have in the NQS?

There are a range of different roles you could take up as follows:

- You might become part of the Implementation Team (IT). This team meets over the 3 years of the process and is the group that coordinates the improvements to the service

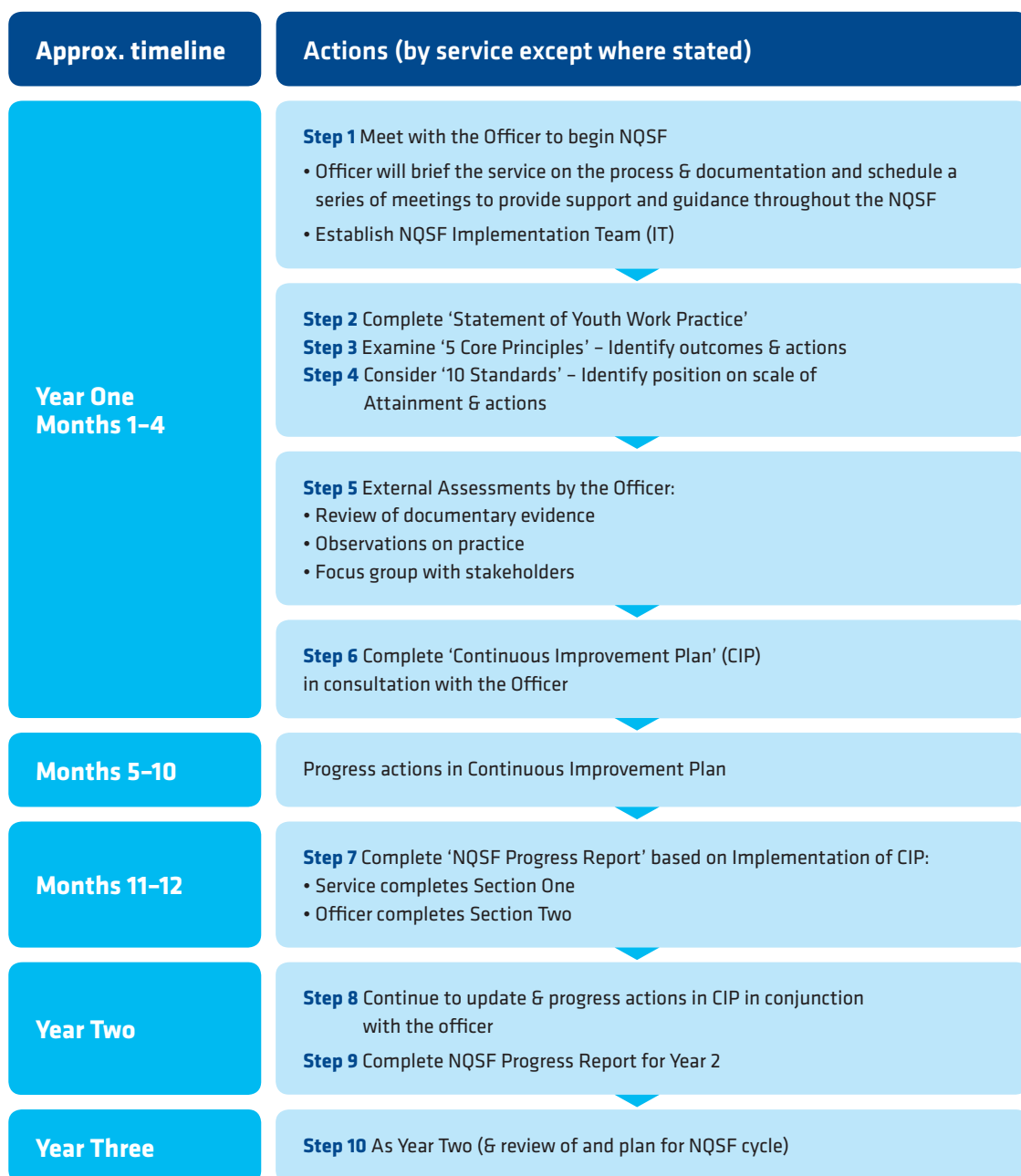
¹ 'Service' refers to projects, services or organisations funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

² 'Officer' refers to the Youth Officer, Liaison Officer, or Standards Officer.

- You might work on one part of the continuous improvement plan (CIP), for example, as a volunteer you might bring your skills to the organisation and help it put together a policy for the service, prepare a staff handbook, get their financial procedures in order, design a website, organise a fundraising event, the options are endless
- You could take part in a focus group, for example, the service might bring together groups of young people, or parents to talk about their experience of the service and to help plan for the future
- You might be involved in the observation on practice. To finish off the NQSF process the Officer comes to visit the service and observe some youth groups in action. This is a very important aspect of the NQSF process and you allowing the Officer into your group will help the service, the VEC and the DCYA improve the services it delivers to young people around the country.

As you can see the time commitment to the NQSF can be as little as letting the Officer attend your normal youth work session or as large as participating in a weekly/monthly activity for up to three years. If you are planning to become involved in the NQSF process it is a good idea to discuss your interest, support needs and availability with the staff of the service first, so that both of you know what to expect from each other.

The following chart gives a timeline of the actions your service will undertake over the three years of the NQSF process.



Who does it apply to and when?

The NQSF was introduced nationally on a phased basis; it commenced in 2011 with staff-led services funded under the following Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) schemes:

- Youth Service Grant Scheme
- Special Projects for Youth
- Young People's Facilities and Services Funds 1 and 2
- Youth Information Centres

It will take a few years to get around to all DCYA funded services, but ultimately they will all participate in the process, as participation is a condition of funding.

Is this an inspection?

No, this is not an inspection. The NQSF is a development and support tool to help youth work providers improve the services they deliver to young people. An individual service, in agreement with the Officer decides how it should improve and sets targets for itself over a three year period. The role of the officer is that of the external assessor, to confirm

the findings of the service and to make sure that stakeholders, including young people are consulted as part of the process.

Will the NQSF be reviewed?

The NQSF itself is subject to monitoring and review to ensure that the framework has ongoing relevance to youth work provision. This will be carried out by a group comprising of representatives from the youth work sector.

For further information on the NQSF initiative please contact:

Your VEC Officer who is contactable through your local VEC.

Overview of the NQSF

Statement of Youth Work Practice:

What you do: ethos; mission; Service provision; defining features/functions

Why you do it: rationale; vision; aim and objectives; outcomes

Who is it for and with: target group; partnerships; linkages; exchanges?

How you do it: modes of provision; methodologies

Where you do it: geographical area; settings; levels*; locations

5 Core Principles – All youth work practice and provision is:

1. Young person-centred; recognising the rights of young people and holding as central their active and voluntary participation

2. Committed to ensuring and promoting the safety and well-being of young people

3. Educational and developmental

4. Committed to ensuring and promoting equality and inclusiveness in all its dealings with young people and adults

5. Dedicated to the provision of quality youth work and committed to continuous improvement

Please identify one achieved outcome in relation to each of the Core Principles

Standards Section 1: Youth Work Practice and Provision

1. Planning
2. Practice
3. Progression
4. Monitoring and Assessment
5. Policies and Procedures

Self and External Assessment

Continuous Improvement Plan

Progress Report

Standards Section 2: Organisational Management and Development

1. Governance and Operational Management
2. Strategy
3. Volunteers
4. Human Resource Management
5. Collaboration and Integration

* The term 'levels' should be taken to mean the levels at which your service operates e.g. local; regional; national; and international.

Step 1 Information Note

Establishing the Implementation Team (IT)



What is the National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF)?

The National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) is a support and development tool for the youth work sector. The main purpose of it is to support youth work services¹ to improve the work they do, and show that work to others, including the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) who fund many youth services around the country.

The NQSF is based on 5 core principles or essential qualities found in good youth work practice, and 10 standards. The standards represent the main elements a youth service needs to have in place in order to deliver quality youth work services to young people and their communities and also meet its requirements to manage effectively.

What is the 'Implementation Team' in the NQSF process?

The Implementation Team (IT) is a group of three or more people who have an interest in the youth service who come together to lead the service through the assessment and improvement phases of the NQSF.

Who is on it?

The IT is led by a paid member of staff and should include a cross section of the service's stakeholders, for example a management board/committee member, a staff member, young people, parents, and community representatives.

What does the IT do?

The IT guides and implements the NQSF process within the service over the 3 year cycle. In practice this means that they do the following;

Year 1

With the support of the paid staff member, the IT:

- Audits and assesses existing services under 15 headings and then selects a position on the scale of attainment
- Gathers 'evidence' to back up the position taken on the scale of attainment
- After the external assessment takes place they meet with the Officer² and agree final positions on the scale of attainment
- Agrees and progresses the Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP)
- Completes the end of year progress report

Years 2 and 3

The role of the IT in years two and three is to ensure the progression of actions identified in the service's CIP, this may include adding additional actions as needs and opportunities arise in the service. They also report to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) on progress achieved, by completing the self-assessment progress report at the end of each calendar year.

The IT meets at least 4 times a year to sign off on actions achieved in the previous quarter and to prioritise actions for the next quarter. Their role is to progress actions by ensuring that all planned CIP actions are realistic, achievable, assigned and time-related.

Does an IT member need to commit to the process for three years?

Ideally a member would remain on the IT for the three years of the process. But this will not always be possible, so the membership of the IT can change

¹ For the purpose of this document the word 'service' is used to refer to youth projects, services and organisations.

² 'Officer' refers to the Liaison Officer, Youth Officer or Standards Officer.

over the three years as different people might be skilled or interested in particular areas.

What is the role of the lead member of the IT?

A staff member will act as the lead member of the IT. It is the role of this person to:

- Liaise with the Officer
- Facilitate and co-ordinate the meetings of the IT
- Ensure mechanisms are in place to inform the wider organisation of developments and progress in relation to the NQSF
- Provide support where feasible to enable the active participation of stakeholders
- Organise the delegation of tasks to others outside the IT

What support is available to assist IT members?

There a number of supports available, firstly the service can access support and guidance from their Officer. The Officer will provide step by step guidance for the IT in completing the NQSF tasks.

The service could also allocate a staff member(s) (paid or unpaid) to support young people, volunteers, parents and community representatives to participate in the NQSF process.



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Step 2 Information Note

Statement of Youth Work Practice



Services¹ will have **previously submitted a 'Statement of Practice' in section 2 of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs Annual Progress Report and Renewal Application Form.**

This statement should now be reviewed by the Implementation Team (IT) and amended as appropriate.

The challenge is to develop a concise statement of approximately 500 words. This should give a brief overview of what the service is about. It will probably be necessary for the service to prioritise key points of information pertinent to each section outlined on page 10 of the NQSF document.

There is an opportunity for the service to include more detailed documentation further into the process as part of their evidence in support of the core principles and standards.

One approach to preparing the statement is to begin by answering the questions set out in the NQSF document (page 10) this may include drawing on a number of existing documents.

When you have answered the questions you can then prepare a statement that draws on all the relevant elements and concisely summarises what the service is about.

Example²

What you do – ethos, mission, service provision, defining features/functions.

Ethos

Youth Service @@@@ believes that all young people should be valued members of society and our community. We promote a partnership approach between adults and young people and endeavour to support young people to make informed decisions on issues that impact on their lives.

Mission

Our mission is to enable young people to develop the skills and confidence to progress in life and in society. We support young people to access their rights as equals and empower them to promote positive change in society. The work of the service is guided by the following principles:

- To promote the participation of young people through empowering youth work practice
- To offer opportunities for young people, to engage, learn and develop
- To always see work with young people as being intrinsically linked to family and community
- To positively influence the thinking and actions of all those who work with and on behalf of young people
- To uphold the ideal of volunteerism
- To acknowledge the work of volunteers across the organisation

Service Provision

We provide a range of services and opportunities through centre based youth work programmes, drop-ins, youth information centres, peer leadership, training, and street work. A defining feature of our service is our focus on interagency approaches to meeting the multi-dimensional needs of young people in our catchment area.

We support young people through:

- Drop ins for (mixed gender) 10–12 year olds, 14–16 year olds, 17+
- Street work in 3 different communities – Xxxx, Xxxx and Xxxx

¹ 'Service' refers to a project, service or organisation funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs

² 'Example' The example is not based on any particular service, and is not reflective of a preferred ethos or model.

- Youth information centre that includes the provision of online supports
- Issue based programmes
- Health promotion programmes
- Youth forums
- Development of a youth café
- The provision of training and youth leadership.
- Peer education programmes on a range of issues including drug misuse and sexual health
- The provision of training for those working with young people
- Centre based projects at community level and city centre level.
- Outreach
- Street work
- Residential work
- Outdoor Education
- Educational visits and away trips
- Youth Participation
- Accreditation
- Youth Exchanges

Why you do it – rationale, vision, aims and objectives, outcomes.

Youth Service @@@@ believes that youth work can make a significant difference to the lives of young people in our community. Over time young people engaged in the service will develop the ability to make informed decisions and the skills to progress as young adults in society.

The service aims to develop leadership skills and promotes participation as a means for young people to play an active role in the decision making process within the service and other relevant forums.

The objectives of the service are to:

- Develop innovative models of youth work
- Engage with young people from the three regions of XX and X and support them to develop appropriate responses for their area
- Co-ordinate a range of programmes which respond to issues of youth mental health
- Support best practice in the area of Human Resources; this will begin with the development of a staff handbook
- Provide a youth work base in each of the three areas of the region
- Encourage young people involved in drop ins to engage in social and personal development programmes
- Promote youth democracy and advocate for young people to be heard
- Promote equality of opportunity to all young people
- Develop specific programmes targeted at young people from new communities

- Promote the service within the community and nationally
- Advocate with statutory bodies with regard to services and facilities for young people

Who is it for and with?

Youth Service @@@@ works with young people aged 10–21 years. While offering a comprehensive youth service to all young people in the community we prioritise our more intensive direct youth work to those most at risk. Interagency collaboration is key to our work. To that end we work with a range of other agencies including the HSE, Probation, Gardaí, Local Drugs Task Force and other Youth and Welfare Services.

How you do it

Youth Service @@@@ operates primarily from a Critical Social Education Model of youth work and aims to empower young people and the community to affect social change.

Where you do it

Youth Service @@@@ covers County Down which includes 10 distinct locations where services are delivered. Our main facility is Gambini Youth Centre on Crosshaven Road in Banbridge and we also have three outreach points in Monkstown Estate, Loughinisland and Glebe Road. Where access to youth specific premises is a difficulty we utilise other facilities such as schools, community centres and sports halls.

Once you have answered the questions you can then prepare a statement of approximately 500 words that draws on all the relevant elements and concisely summarises what the service is about.

–See example below

STEP 2

Sample - Statement of Youth Work Practice

Mission

The mission of *Youth Service @@@@* is to enable young people to develop the skills and confidence to progress in life and in society. We support young people to access their rights as equals and empower them to promote positive change in society.

Ethos

We believe that all young people should be valued members of society and our community. We promote a partnership approach between adults and young people and endeavour to support young people to make informed decisions on issues that impact on their lives.

Provision

We provide a range of services and opportunities through centre based youth work programmes, drop-ins, youth information centres, peer leadership, training, and street work. A defining feature of our service is our focus on interagency approaches to meeting the multi-dimensional needs of young people in our catchment area.

Rationale

Youth Service @@@@ believes that youth work can make a significant difference to the lives of young people in our community. Over time young people engaged in the service will develop the ability to make informed decisions and the skills to progress as young adults in society.

Aims

The service aims to develop leadership skills and promotes participation as a means for young people to play an active role in the decision making process within the service and other relevant forums. We operate primarily from a Critical Social Education Model of youth work and aim to empower young people and the community to affect social change.

Our primary target group is 10–21 year olds and we prioritise those most at risk in the community. We work with a range of other agencies including the HSE, Probation, Gardaí, Local Drugs Task Force and other Youth and Welfare Services. *Youth Service @@@@* covers County Down which includes 10 distinct locations where services are delivered. Our main facility is Gambini Youth Centre on Crosshaven Road in Banbridge and we also have three outreach points in Monkstown Estate, Loughinisland and Glebe Road.



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Steps 3 & 4 Information Note

Self-Assessment Process

This information note will assist services¹ to prepare for the self-assessment phase of the NQSF process, gather documentary evidence cited as part of the self-assessment phase and complete the NQSF template. The note is applicable to all services irrespective of size or organisational structure with the assessment process of the NQSF taking into account the operation and specific circumstances of individual services. This document should be read in conjunction with pages 10-12 and pages 20-30 of the NQSF document.

What is included in the NQSF assessment process?

There are two phases to the assessment process; the first is a self-assessment which is carried out by the service's Implementation Team (IT) in consultation with key stakeholders. It involves reviewing the five core principles and ten standards, identifying how these apply in practice within the service and gathering evidence to support the position taken by the service in relation to them.

The second phase is an external assessment which is carried out by the Officer². It takes place following the self-assessment and seeks to externally validate the position taken by the service based on the evidence presented.

What is included in the assessment will be influenced by the funding, size and structure of a particular service. However the assessment process (both internal and external) as laid out in the NQSF document will be completed for all services irrespective of size or structure. In all cases it will focus on the element of the service's work funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (e.g. workers/programmes funded by the DCYA and the management structure that employs them). There is however scope to involve other elements of the service and this will be agreed between the Officer and the service.

For example if the main focus of DCYA funded posts is to provide back up support to volunteers who carry out the direct work with young people, then the NQSF will spread as far as the work of the paid staff.

However if a service has additional non DCYA funding streams as part of its operation or programme delivery, the service and Officer decide in consultation whether they should be included in the assessment. In this instance the observation on practice and focus groups will concentrate on areas of work funded through DCYA.

Who should be involved in the self-assessment process?

The self-assessment process aims to be an honest appraisal of the service and should try to include the views of as many key stakeholders as possible to ensure the views of the wider organisation are reflected. There are a number of ways of doing this for example:

- Include it as an agenda item on all organisational meetings
- Survey participants by turning the NQSF indicators into questions and either email it around or put the questions up on the walls of the service and get participants to add comments

What is the Service assessing?

The service looks at the 5 core principles (CP) and the associated indicators and asks how these apply within the service. The core principles are fundamental to youth work and should define and direct the practice and provision.

For example, CP 1 'Young person centred: recognising the rights of young people and holding as central their active voluntary participation' has five indicators, the first is **1.1 Systematic needs**

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assessment – turn this statement into a question relevant to your service for example ‘how does the service assess the needs of young people in its clubs or groups? Or how does the service assess the needs of young people in the local community?’

List the methods used by the service to assess needs, and then discuss if there are gaps or areas for improvement and note these for future reference. Don’t focus on the solution at this stage as this will be addressed when preparing the Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP). The list can go into the documentary evidence section along with supporting evidence e.g. the minutes of team meetings where young peoples’ needs were discussed.

The process is then repeated for the 10 standards and their associated indicators. At this stage the service sets itself a position on the scale of attainment based on the indicators and evidence. Just like the core principles section, turn the indicators into relevant questions, for example, ‘is our planning structured? If so, how?’–List the ways you plan, then discuss if there are gaps or areas for improvement and note these for future reference.

The list can go into the documentary evidence section along with additional supporting evidence, for example, the operational plan for the last year, minutes of review meetings, staff meetings.

Following this process consider and select the position on the scale of attainment for each standard that best reflects your current situation.

For example: Planning (3.3.1 of NQSF document)

- **Absent** planning rarely takes place
- **Acquiring** planning is unstructured
- **Achieved** planning is structured
- **Advanced** planning is structured, implemented and reviewed

Is documentary evidence required for each of the Core Principles and Standards?

Unless your service is assigned as absent on a particular indicator of a standard, there needs to be documentary evidence for each of the 5 core principles and 10 standards, ideally there should be one piece for every indicator.

How should the documentary evidence cited as part of the self-assessment be arranged?

This should be discussed with your Officer. The main thing is that it is structured and easy to follow. For example if you choose to have a folder, it should have 15 clearly marked subsections, one for each principle and standard, with the evidence or location of evidence for each indicator clearly displayed inside.

Can the same piece of evidence be used for a number of different Core Principles and Standards?

Yes it can and there is no need to have multiple copies of the evidence. However evidence should be clearly referenced and available to the Officer when he/she is carrying out the review.

When large documents are being used as evidence it is important that the IT reference relevant sections of the document (i.e. sections or page numbers that relate to the core principle or standard being reviewed).

What can be included as documentary evidence?

Services can use a wide variety of materials as documentary evidence, for example, it can include reports, policies, minutes of meetings, videos of practice, websites, photographs, posters on a wall, letters, external evaluation reports, planning and evaluation sheets, programme planning and recording sheets.

Completing the NQSF template (Self-Assessment Part 3, page 20 of the NQSF document)

Completing section 3.2

Column 1

This contains the 5 core principles for youth work.

Column 2

This contains the list of prescribed indicators for each of the core principles.

Column 3

This section is to be completed by the service. Think of it as a table of contents for the evidence. In this column list the evidence you have, and clearly state where it can be found (evidence folder, programme, website address, posters on wall etc). There should be evidence for each indicator.

Column 4

List one outcome for each core principle (you should have five outcomes).

Outcomes should focus on the ‘**impact**’ your service has on a young person, and/or a group of young people, and/or an organisation and/or the community.

Short and medium term outcomes can be measured in changes in **knowledge, skills, behaviours** or **attitudes** of the young people/service/community as a result of a programme or activity run by the service. Medium to long term outcomes can be measured in changes in areas like **education, relationships with adults, health, social conditions, economic conditions, safety, or service provision**.

- The outcome should be written in the past tense because it is something that has already happened
- The outcome should clearly link to the core principle, and there should be evidence of having achieved the outcome. So for example you could use an outcome from a programme you have delivered in the past year

Completing section 3.3

There are 10 standards, with a page for each standard (pages 21–30 of the NQSF document). On each page there are 4 columns, **absent**, **acquiring**, **achieved** and **advanced**. When the service assesses itself (see 'what is the service assessing?' section above), it then completes the template by inserting a tick beside the appropriate indicator.

Below each column there is a row, where additional indicators can be added.

Below that again is a row where you list the evidence in place. Think of it as a table of contents. Under the

relevant column list the evidence you have, number it to correspond to the appropriate indicator and clearly state where it can be found (evidence folder, programme, website address, posters on wall etc). There should be evidence for each indicator unless it is ticked as absent.

Once these columns have been completed tick an overall position for your service on the scale of attainment for the standard being assessed and in the final row give a clear reason for your choice.

A completed example for Standard 3.3.1 Planning is detailed below:

3.3 Standards		3.3.1 Planning		Section 1: Youth Work Practice and Provision			
All youth work practice is planned and designed according to young people's needs, outlining a clear rationale, objectives and expected outcomes.							
The indicators below describe what should be in place in support of this standard at each point along the scale of attainment. Please consider these indicators in relation to your organisation and insert ✓ beside the appropriate indicator. You may add any other indicators you think are appropriate.							
Absent	✓	Acquiring	✓	Achieved	✓	Advanced	✓
1. No rationale underpinning practice.		1. Rationale underpinning practice is mostly clear.		1. Rationale underpinning practice is clear.	✓	1. Rationale underpinning practice is clear and comprehensive.	
2. Planning rarely takes place.		2. Planning is unstructured.		2. Planning is structured.		2. Planning is structured, implemented and reviewed.	✓
3. Objectives are not in place.		3. Objectives exist, but are unclear.		3. Objectives are clear and mostly achieved.	✓	3. Objectives are clear and fully achieved.	
4. No outcomes identified.		4. Outcomes are being identified.		4. Outcomes are identified and mostly achieved.	✓	4. Outcomes are identified and fully achieved.	
5. Operational service plans do not exist.		5. Operational/service plans are being developed.		5. Operational/service plans are in place.		5. Operational/service plans are documented, implemented and reviewed.	✓
6. No strategic plan in place or being developed.		6. Strategic plan is being developed.		6. Strategic plan is implemented.	✓	6. Strategic plan is implemented and actions being achieved.	
Add any other indicators below:							

Example of completed Standards form. Continued overleaf.

3.3 Standards

3.3.1 Planning

Section 1: Youth Work Practice and Provision

All youth work practice is planned and designed according to young people's needs, outlining a clear rationale, objectives and expected outcomes.

In the relevant spaces below, please describe the evidence your organisation has in place in relation to the above indicators:

		<p>1. Evidence folder (section S1.1) contains minutes of planning and review meetings and a copy of a programme record outlining the rationale for the specific programme of work.</p> <p>3./4 Evidence folder (section S1.3/4) contains a completed programme planning and evaluation sheet (programme record) for 'loud girls' group which ran September – April 2011/12</p> <p>6. Evidence folder (section S7.1) contains a copy of the strategic plan, and (section S1.2) contains a report to the board on actions achieved in 2011.</p>	<p>2. Evidence folder (section S1.2) contains copies of the projects 2011 planning and review timetable, agendas and minutes of the planning sessions, and copy of manager's report to the board which includes a summary of all actions achieved in 2011.</p> <p>Team meetings, planning,</p> <p>5. Evidence folder (section S1.5) contains a copy of the CDYSB report pack, and the minutes of the board and staff team meetings where it was reviewed, and approved.</p>
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Having considered the above, identify a position on the scale of attainment that best reflects your organisation's position in relation to this standard (mark ✓ on a point on the scale below). If you think your organisation is at different points on the scale of attainment in relation to the various indicators, choose a point on the scale that, overall, best reflects this position.

Absent	Acquiring	Achieved	✓	Advanced
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Why have you chosen this point on the scale?

Outcome based planning is integrated at all levels in the organisation. Time is allocated for specific programme planning, quarterly planning, annual plans and for the completion of 3 year strategic plans. Young people and other relevant stakeholders are also involved in the planning process at various stages.



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Step 5 Information Note

External Assessment Process

5

External Assessment

The purpose of the external assessment is to validate the services¹ own positioning on the scale of attainment.

The Officer² uses three methods to do this:

1. Review of documentary evidence
2. Observations on practice
3. Focus groups with stakeholders

The documentary evidence covers all principles and standards. The observation on practice then selects a number of principles and standards to assess more closely. Finally the focus group with stakeholders takes a broader perspective and gathers evidence of quality service delivery.

No one method enables the Officer to validate the services positioning on the scale of attainment. The assessment must be based on the findings from all three elements of the external assessment. It is important not to over focus on the documentary evidence, as the officer takes into account all three forms of evidence.

This information note is designed to support services to prepare for the external assessment phase and is divided into 3 sections

SECTION 1 Information note on the 'review of documentary evidence'

SECTION 2 Information note on 'observations on practice'

SECTION 3 Information note on 'focus groups with stakeholders'

At the end of the external assessment process the Officer gives a copy of their external assessment report to the service and agrees a final position on the scale of attainment.

SECTION 1

Information Note on Review of Documentary Evidence

The following guideline will assist services to prepare for this phase of the NQSF and ensure the process proceeds speedily and efficiently. This should be interactive with communications taking place between the Implementation Team (IT), its lead person and the Officer.

When the full review of documentary evidence is taking place on site, services should ensure sufficient time is set aside for the process. Services should allow two to three days for this purpose – which may be negotiated up or down at a local level depending on requirements. The service should also ensure that appropriate space is made available to the Officer to carry out this function.

What is 'Review of Documentary Evidence' in the NQSF process?

The review of documentary evidence is the first stage of the external assessment process; it aims to give an overall picture of the youth service using documentary evidence. It takes place once services have completed the self-assessment process.

Where does it take place?

It takes place in the premises of the service or externally by agreement, however, relevant information or documentation should be provided to the Officer in advance of the on-site review where possible, including the completed part 3 (pages 19-30) of the NQSF document. All evidence should be retained locally by the service but be available on request to the Officer.

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Preparing for the documentary review visit

- The service should send the Officer a typed copy of part 3 (pages 19-30) of the NQSF document in advance of the agreed date for the visit (word template available from Officer)
- Ideally there should be evidence for each core principle and standard and their respective indicators
- If a piece of documentary evidence is referred to it should be available to be reviewed
- Evidence should be easy to find, filed under each core principle and standard with clear references to relevant sections of key documents, for example staff handbook, policy documents
- The evidence presented should clearly match the indicator and the service's own positioning on the scale of attainment
- To ensure the process is as interactive as possible a member of the IT should be available to clarify any issues arising. If it is not possible to have someone on site they should be readily accessible by phone and aware that they may be needed for this purpose
- Large documents of the visit should be e-mailed/ forwarded to the officer in advance

SECTION 2

Information Note on Observations on Practice

The following information note will assist services to prepare for the Officers, observations on practice visit as part of the external assessment process.

What is 'observations on practice' in the NQSF process?

The observations on practice focus on a specific area of practice that indicates support for a particular core principle or standard.

In carrying out the observation on practice the Officer is reviewing practice with a view to validating the services own positioning on the scale of attainment. It will generally focus on one core principle and two standards. These will be agreed with the IT in advance of the observations.

The presence of a 'stranger', 'outsider' or simply 'new person' may have an impact on the group dynamic and the practice being observed. This needs to be factored into the preparation and analysis of the observations on practice.

Selecting the principles and standards to be observed.

The observations on practice are focused on observing the NQSF principles and standards in practice within a service.

- The selection of practice to observe should be identified by the Officer in consultation with the service. This takes place following the review of documentary evidence

- Once the Officer has a clear rationale in mind he/she will:
 - Review the service plan or work programme for the next few months and identify practice to observe
 - Discuss the selection with the lead person from the IT and be guided by their understanding of the practice. For example some groups might be looking at sensitive issues or be at a difficult stage of development and it would not be appropriate for others to join/observe the group. In addition, with regard to certain aspects of services work e.g. if a counselling service/health clinic is operating, it is NOT appropriate that these would be the area of focus in the observations on practice

Preparing for the observation

When preparing for the observation on practice the Officer will:

- Review relevant documents for example, planning sheets, aims and objectives, minutes of meetings, session and programme outcomes. The service should make these available in advance of the observation
- The Officer may request to meet staff beforehand to clarify the Officers role at the observation
- The service should ensure that the participants are informed regarding the observations on practice

SECTION 3

Guidance Note on Focus Groups

The following information note will assist services to prepare for the Officer meetings with designated focus groups as part of the external assessment process.

What is a focus group in the NQSF process?

Focus groups in the NQSF process are a mechanism for gaining feedback and/or the views of stakeholders involved in the service. There are three key questions (page 34 of the NQSF document) that the Officer/s will be seeking to explore with the stakeholders in the meetings, these are:

- What do you get from being part of this service?
- What do you see in practice here?
- What could be better?

While these are the broad areas to be explored, the questions and methods will be adapted to suit the particular group involved.

Who is involved?

Focus groups involve a meeting between the Officer and stakeholders.

For the purpose of the NQSF, stakeholders are defined as those who have a direct interest in the service, for example, young people, staff, management, volunteers and parents.

In some cases stakeholders may want a staff member to be present at a focus group. The presence or availability of a staff member should be carefully considered beforehand.

The idea of achieving a mix of stakeholders within the focus group should be considered as long as it does not inhibit the feedback from particular stakeholders within each group. The Officer and the service should decide what works best in the particular situation.

What happens at a focus group?

A focus group in the NQSF process can take a range of different formats. The main objective is to gain feedback and views of stakeholders under the three questions outlined above, so the method used should match the stakeholder group and their needs.

Methods can include a facilitated meeting with set questions, an informal discussion with the purpose of receiving feedback/views or an alternative mechanism agreed between the service and Officer.

Who leads it?

The Officer plans and facilitates the focus group meeting or session/s. The Officer may bring another Officer to support them in the process. This will be discussed and agreed in advance with the service. It may be useful for service staff who have an established relationship with the stakeholders to meet the group in advance to put them at their ease and answer any queries they may have.

Where does it take place?

The focus group should take place in an environment that the stakeholder group will feel at ease. The venue should be safe, comfortable and free from interruption.

When does it take place?

The focus group is a stage in the external assessment process; it should take place after the Officer has assessed the documentary evidence.

Choosing the stakeholder group

The stakeholder group is chosen by the Officer in consultation with the IT or Lead Person.

- This process will identify the most appropriate stakeholders to talk to

- At least one of the stakeholder groups will be young people, an agreement should be reached with the IT on the composition of that group
- It is the role of the lead person of the IT to arrange the focus group meetings

Preparing for the focus group meeting

When preparing for the focus groups, the service should:

- Agree with the Officer what information needs to be circulated prior to the Focus Group meeting or session/s
- Contact the stakeholders, invite them to participate and give them relevant information
- Identify if consent forms are required and these must be prepared and sent by the service prior to the focus group
- Ensure an appropriate space is available and that any necessary resource materials are in place. This will be agreed in advance
- Be available to assist the Officer with general queries if necessary
- Ensure service staff are on the premises and easily contactable at all times during the focus group meeting/sessions



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Step 6 Information Note

Continuous Improvement Plan

6

What is the 'Continuous Improvement Plan' in the NQSF process?

The 'Continuous Improvement Plan' (CIP) is a strategic identification of the areas the service¹ needs to improve on, the actions that need to be taken to progress these areas, the naming of the person who will carry them out and a timeframe in which they will be progressed.

The CIP is drawn up after the service has negotiated with the Officer² their position on the scale of attainment. The CIP is reviewed and updated on a yearly basis over the three year cycle of the NQSF process. The Officer will check in with the service on a quarterly basis in years 2 and 3.

The CIP is a strategic summary of agreed actions and progress in relation to the NQSF's 5 Core Principles and 10 Standards. It details:

- Identified areas for improvement
- Identified actions to address these areas
- Identified personnel and timeframes

The agreed position/s on the scale of attainment is/are the baseline for the CIP and is/are the benchmark for the service progress and development.

When does it take place?

The CIP is prepared after the Officer completes the external assessment process and gives a copy of their report to the Implementation Team (IT). The CIP is revisited in the first quarter of each subsequent year, following the completion and submission of end of year progress reports. However services should note actions for inclusion in the CIP throughout the assessment process.

Who is involved in the preparation of the CIP?

The CIP is prepared by the Implementation Team in conjunction with the Officer and other relevant members of the service. It should also be agreed with the management structure of the service.

Does the CIP cover each of the Core Principles and Standards?

It is not necessary to have actions for every principle and standard. If an area for improvement is identified under any principle or standard then it can be included in the CIP.

Does the CIP include actions for all of the areas for improvement?

The actions in the CIP are dependent on available resources and capacity within the service. A service may need to prioritise what actions can be realistically achieved with the people, time and resources available. Actions that are not priorities can be carried into the next NQSF 3 year cycle. Priority actions should be agreed in conjunction with the Officer.

What makes a good CIP?

All CIP actions should be:

- Realistic
- Achievable
- Assigned
- Time-related

However when preparing a three year plan, it may only be realistic to specifically timeline actions in the first year. Making a timeline subsequent actions can take place in the first quarter of each calendar year following review and the submission of progress reports.

In year 1 services may include actions that have been identified through the NQSF process and progressed

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before the CIP is formally signed off. These should be reflected and commented on in the end of year progress report.

Preparing the CIP

- The results of the self-assessment (part 3 of the NQSF document) together with the external assessment (part 4 of the NQSF document) form the basis of the CIP
- The Implementation Team and the Officer meet to identify and agree areas for inclusion in the CIP
- The Implementation Team in conjunction with the relevant members of the service must then evaluate available resources, current priorities in the work, and areas in need of immediate attention identified through the NQSF process
- The IT prepares a CIP for the remainder of the three year cycle. This may be done in a number of ways in agreement with your Officer as follows:
 - **Straight forward three year plan**
 - **Three year plan broken into one year tranches**
 - **Three year plan broken into one year tranches with quarterly goal setting**
- The IT then prioritises a number of actions that can be achieved in the remainder of the first calendar year. This may include actions identified through the NQSF process where progress commenced before the CIP was formally signed off
- The CIP is then agreed between the Officer and the Implementation Team
- Subsequent actions in years two and three of the NQSF cycle can be reviewed and timelined for each year in the first quarter of each year
- The NQSF is a fluid and living process, it is designed to respond to emerging issues and trends. If the service identifies priorities that need an immediate response and warrant new actions for the CIP, these can be discussed and agreed with the Officer and relevant parties within the service
- The Officer will check in with the service on a quarterly basis in year two and three to review progress on the implementation of the CIP



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Step 7 Information Note

NQSF Progress Reports

Completing the NQSF Progress Report – Part 6 of NQSF Document: Self-Assessment [6.1] and External Assessment [6.2]

Please refer to pages 14 and 15 and pages 39 to 43 of the NQSF document when reading this information note and completing the self assessment progress report.

What is the ‘Progress Report’ in the NQSF process?

The progress report is step 7 of the NQSF process and refers to sections 6.1 and 6.2 of the NQSF document. It is a report containing the self-assessment and external assessment elements that are submitted at year end to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs [DCYA]. It offers a review and comment on the progress of the Continuous Improvement Plan [CIP] identifies further actions to be progressed and emerging issues.

What are the elements of the ‘Progress Report’?

The progress report is in two parts;

Section 6:1 is based on self assessment and is completed by the Implementation Team [IT]. It should be submitted by the service¹ to the Officer² in the 4th quarter of each year. In effect this section of the progress report outlines the improvements that a service has or has not achieved in the context of the CIP and should be supported and endorsed by the key internal stakeholders. Section [6:1] focuses on a review of progress in relation to the core principles and standards, gives an opportunity for the service to detail further actions and issues emerging and provides a mechanism to provide feedback on their involvement in the NQSF.

Section 6:2 is completed by the Officer and comments on the external assessment process, the positions taken by the service in relation to the scale of attainment; progress achieved in the implementation of the CIP and recommended actions for future progress.

Who is involved in the preparation of the Progress Report?

The annual self-assessment progress reports [6:1] should be prepared by the IT and discussed and agreed within the management structure of the service.

Preparing the Self – Assessment Progress Report

The Implementation Team should:

- Review actions identified in its Continuous Improvement Plan and comment on progress achieved to date.
- Where actions relating to the core principles have been progressed these should be highlighted by identifying an achieved outcome³. This is in addition to the achieved outcomes identified through the initial NQSF self-assessment process.
- Identify any further areas to be developed. Issues and actions specific to individual principles or standards are on pages 40 and 41 of the NQSF document and more generic issues and actions are included on page 42. When completing page 42 both sections can be treated as one incorporating further actions and issues emerging.

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3 ‘Outcome’ refers to short/medium term changes in knowledge, skills, behaviour or attitude of a young person, a group of young people, an organisation or a community as a result of a CIP action, medium/long term changes in areas like education, relationships with adults, health, social conditions, economic conditions, safety or service provision

- Provide feedback on the service's involvement in the NQSF process to date and make any suggestions to improve either the process or the documentation. (page 43)

The External Assessment Progress Report [6.2]

The annual external assessment reports are completed by the Officer. The service will be provided with copies of these reports.

What are the key elements of a good Progress Report?

It is essential that the progress achieved can be clearly identified and illustrated. Completing a progress report should be guided by the following points:

- Information provided in both the self-assessment progress reports should be clear, concise and constructive
- The layout of the information in the reports should be easy to read and follow
- It is preferable that a bullet point or a numbered style is used rather than a narrative style in order to link the report points across the different columns/sections

A collaborative approach between the Officer and the IT to assess progress is encouraged in order to build capacity, discuss quality of work, support good practice and identify agreed areas for development.

Responsibility for completing and signing off the self-assessment progress reports rests with the IT. The management of each service should support and endorse this process. Similarly responsibility for completing and signing off the external assessment progress reports rests solely with the Officer.

In cases where identified CIP actions have not recorded progress or have been delayed the Officer will engage in a dialogue with the service in relation to this.



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Information Note

Quarterly CIP Review Meetings NQSF Years 2 and 3

This information note is designed to support Implementation Teams (IT) to carry out their NQSF role in years two and three of the NQSF process. It outlines the role of the Officer and the Implementation Team (IT), and gives guidance on quarterly review meetings.

What happens in years 2 and 3 of the NQSF process?

In years two and three, services progress actions identified in their Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP).

What is the role of the Implementation team (IT) in years 2 and 3 of the process?

The role of the IT is to ensure the progression of actions identified in the services CIP; this may include adding additional actions as needs and opportunities arise in the service. They also report to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) on progress achieved, by completing the self-assessment progress report at the end of each calendar year (pages 40–43).

The IT meets at least 4 times a year to sign off on actions achieved in the previous quarter and to prioritise actions for the next quarter. Their role is to progress actions by ensuring that all planned CIP actions are realistic, achievable, assigned and time-related.

What is the role of the Officer in years 2 & 3 of the process?

The Officer continues in the external assessor role in years 2 and 3 (primarily in relation to actions identified in the CIP). They meet with the IT on a quarterly basis to check the progression of agreed CIP actions and to support the service to identify realistic and achievable actions for the next quarter.

The Officer reports on progress to the DCYA by completing the external assessment progress report. This report is based on the quarterly meetings and the service's submission of the end of year progress report.

Who attends the meetings?

The Officer and the IT attend the quarterly review meetings.

When do they take place?

They take place four times per year, usually March, June, September and December, although dates are agreed locally between the Officer and the IT.

What is discussed at the meetings?

These are formal meetings which follow an agreed agenda and a record of which are kept. The meetings focus on the progress of CIP actions in the last quarter, and the actions for the next quarter.

The services CIP provides the guide for the meeting as the document will have identified and time lined actions.

An agenda must include

- Actions developed in the last quarter
 - Achieved actions
 - Actions delayed and reasons for delay
 - Where needed, remedial actions to refocus the plan
- Emerging issues / additional unplanned actions
- Priority actions for the next quarter
 - Areas for improvement
 - Actions to be carried out
 - Who will progress these and when
- Date for next meeting

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